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*The National Curriculum Framework for School Education*

# INDIA IS AHEAD IN TEXTBOOKS

CBSE textbooks treat Partition in a nuanced manner, but state boards still take

The radical departures went. (National Council of Educational Research and Training) made while implementing the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005) changed the face of several school subjects, including history. The title of the history series for Classes VI to VIII, *Our Past*, signifies the new perspective—that history accommodates the diverse ways in which regions, groups and ordinary people, including women, have experienced the past. Shift in the perspective and structure of senior-level textbooks is equally sharp. The new textbooks demonstrate how historians work, how they use sources and evidence, and why interpretations of the same event differ. Old textbooks gave a frozen narrative, but did not reveal its basis. The new textbooks cultivate analytical skills and historical imagination. The old syllabus and textbooks handled certain topics with great hesitation. They were considered too sensitive to be discussed in detail. Partition was one such topic. It was dealt with in an official tone and sketchily.

In 1998, when I started working on a comparative study of Indian and Pakistani textbooks (published later under the title, *Prejudice and Pride*; Penguin, 2001), I discovered that perception of Partition was the key to understanding the contrast between the histories used in the two countries to teach about a common past. My study showed that to Pakistani children, Partition was presented as a triumph, and to Indian children, it was presented as a tragedy. In neither case did the textbooks attempt to explain how Partition became inevitable, or why it was accompanied by such horrific violence. This is no more the case with NCERT's new textbooks. The new textbook for Class XII, *Themes in Indian History—Part III*, deals with Partition at length. It balances the political dimensions of Partition with the trauma it brought to millions of common people on both sides of the border. Archival visuals, oral narratives, and ambiguities are discussed. Background information is provided in margins and

boxes while the main text enables the student to engage with the sequence of events that pushed the politics of the 1940s. The exercises given at the end are designed to arouse children's interest in unanswered questions and counterfactuals.

This wonderful achievement is indeed a matter of satisfaction for India, because Pakistan has little to report by way of textbook reforms despite many a resolution of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) signed by representatives from both sides. Yet, behind this satisfactory, indeed praiseworthy work of NCERT that India can rightfully boast, lies the endemic lack of quality in textbooks produced by state boards. Some of the states have reprinted their textbooks, but most state boards make their own arrangements. The quality of secondary and senior secondary level textbooks is poor in most state boards, but Punjab and West Bengal are among the worst cases. These are also the states which experienced the trauma of Partition most directly. One would have thought that they prioritise the study of Partition, but the opposite is true. Partition continues to be used as the terminal point of the history syllabus. Its portrayal assumes that Pakistan is seen as an illegitimate product of the freedom struggle. Since history comes to an end with Partition and Independence, children will never again hear about Pakistan from their teacher. Pakistan will remain like a silent, reserved presence on the margins of the young, educated mind.

In Punjab, Partition is part of the syllabus for Class XI. The approved textbook, *History of India* by M.S. Sodhi, covers the 'effects of Partition' in a short paragraph of 15 melodramatic lines. In this conventional textbook, there is no room for explanatory elaboration, visuals or engaging exercises. It is squarely aimed at helping students get through a conventional examination. The job left for students to do is to memorise them. The Class XII book by the same author covers the syllabus of Punjab's regional history from 1400 to 1849. This book is stuffed with details of the medieval period. Attacks, conquests, changes of regime and

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# T REFORM

judiced view of history

killings are covered with meticulous detail. There is little room for analysis here. The syllabus provides a script for going beyond the second Anglo-Sikh war. So there is no question of introducing children to the challenges that Punjab has faced in the context of modernisation in economic, political and social spheres. Nor is there any possibility that the children of India's Punjab may learn something, or at least feel curious, about the other Punjab. This is clearly not a goal of the state's education policy. Nor is it a goal in Bengal where textbook quality is equally poor and the vision of syllabus makers just as narrow as it is in Punjab.

These are, of course, misconceptions. Across the country, most of the state boards have changed little over the last 50 years in terms of their capacity to design syllabi, create or recommend textbooks, and conduct examinations. The recommendations of the Amrik Singh Committee have gathered the proverbial dust on official shelves. The annual conference held with state boards has not, apparently, led to any real interaction or flow of innovative ideas in curriculum and textbook development. At the elementary level, SER (State Council of Educational Research and Training) is supposed to look after syllabus-making and textbook production in most states. It is also a fragile body, with unstable staff and little clout. Given these conditions, the overall capacity for quality in production of textbooks is quite poor. Schools affiliated to the state are obliged to use state textbooks (at least after Class VII), and they serve the richer strata of society. Schools linked to state boards cater to the working class and the rural masses. This story is noticeably different from that of Pakistan where private schools serving the rich prescribe the remarkably good textbooks published by the Oxford University Press while the masses are fed on ideological mush. In both countries, the dominant classes have carved a no-man's-land for their own children and abandoned the children of the masses to cope with an unreformed provincial system.

If peace between India and Pakistan is to become a goal of educational policy, exponentially greater energy than what has been so far available for reform, will have to be deployed in both countries. In India, we are ahead of Pakistan in initiating particular reforms at the national level. Sustaining them at the state level is an easy task. It is not merely a question of not allowing textbooks to perpetuate stereotypes. Textbooks that allow children to think need teachers who are trained to encourage freedom of thought. Across both India and Pakistan, such teachers are in short supply. In fact, teaching the young has been trivialised as a profession over the recent decades in both countries. Innovative syllabi and textbooks are merely the first step for educational reform. Teacher education and examinations are the next key sites of struggle. Orienting teachers towards a mature view of the past must become a priority if resources are to be saved from preparation for war. But then, the tragic perspective that state textbooks in India continue to offer on the aftermath of the freedom struggle will have to be revisited first. It inadvertently nurtures permanent prejudice and anger towards our neighbour. ■

